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40 Agency pulls plug on Libby

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Special to the Inter Lake

LIBBY — A proposal to spill water from Libby Dam in the spring to help sturgeon has been withdrawn by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The decision was made in early December, according to Brian Marotz, special projects director for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

"They're backing off the spill this year," Marotz said. "They couldn't justify the headaches."

Federal agencies were also facing a no-win scenario with Montana. State officials told the federal wildlife agency this fall that spills between 1,000 and 2,000 cubic feet per second from Libby Dam cause a significant increase in dissolved gases in the

Kootenai River.

Those gases exceed state water quality standards and there is no procedure for granting a variance.

State fish biologists have expressed concerns that the federal wildlife agency's approach to saving the sturgeon ignores other native species in the river.

Since the sturgeon biological opinion was released in 1999, Marotz has called for a more "multi-species approach" to saving the sturgeon.

The Kalispell-based specialist said he would like more focus on artificial structures in the river that could increase the velocity below the surface and wash sediments off the rocky bottom where sturgeon like to deposit their eggs.

The biological opinion for recovering the endangered white sturgeon

calls for flows from Libby Dam above the roughly 26,000 cubic feet per second that can be released through the dam's turbines. A spill of 5,000 cfs and the addition of a sixth turbine were initially sought by the federal fish biologists as a means of increasing flows downstream.

The "net and jet" program used by the Kootenai Tribe fisheries program should also be given more opportunity, Marotz said. Last spring, tribal fisheries biologists caught adult sturgeon and transported them upstream of Bonners Ferry to a section of the river where conditions could be more attractive to the prehistoric fish.

The rocky surfaces provide a place for the eggs to stick to the bottom until they hatch. Once the larvae leave the egg, the cracks and crevices provide shelter from predators.

Dam spill plan

In areas of the river where the bottom is covered with silt, the eggs are left to tumble in the flow and are often covered with the sandy deposits, preventing them from surviving.

Biologists have documented sturgeon spawning, they have found eggs in the river and have found larvae, but there is no record of a young sturgeon surviving to adulthood since Libby Dam began operating in the 1970s.

In addition to the tribe's work, the primary recovery focus has been on higher flows in the Kootenai River above Bonners Ferry through higher releases from Libby Dam.

Farmers along that stretch of river in Idaho, as well as homeowners in the Libby area, fishing guides and state biologists, have voiced their opposition to higher discharges.

Marotz said he would like to see the spring/early summer sturgeon flows continue but without the big peaks. He would also like to see a gradual ramp-down rather than sudden drops in the river flows.

"We're learning more and more from the Flathead River that stable, lower flows are more beneficial than fluctuating flows," he said.

For this year, he said, complaints from river users and landowners were effective in making the federal recovery team reconsider spilling from the dam.

However, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Ecology Center filed suit in February 2003, claiming the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is refusing to follow the recommended operation at Libby Dam called for in the 2000 biological opinion.